

## GUIDELINES ON ESSAY WRITING

Cecile Fabre, August 2010.

Writing an essay is one of the most important skills you will learn while at university. Even if you do not go on to do graduate work and never write another academic essay in your life, you will nevertheless learn to present your ideas in a coherent and lucid fashion.

At this point, you have already written some essays (e.g. for A levels preparation). However, it is worth reminding you of some of the most important ‘principles’ of essay writing in general – particularly in philosophy.

### 1. Structure.

**a.** An essay is an answer to a specific question (more on which below.) It must therefore introduce the question and outline briefly the answer which you will give to it, in an introductory paragraph. The main body of the essay must provide that answer, and you should finish with a concluding paragraph which summarises the main findings, and, if appropriate, opens up the debate (e.g. by mentioning other issues which are relevant and interesting but which constitutes *further* avenues of inquiry.)

**b.** There are various ways of structuring an essay. A fairly standard one (and relatively safe!) is to make your case for a particular answer (‘X’) and then examine and reject objections to X. Or vice versa. But avoid mixing arguments for with arguments against.

### 2. Providing an answer.

**a.** You *must* answer the question itself: an essay is not a general discussion on a broad topic; it is an answer to a specific question. So, for example, if you are asked the question ‘There is no place for the concept of loyalty in Utilitarianism’, you cannot write a general discussion on utilitarianism. You have to tackle *this particular question*. Accordingly, you must ensure, when writing the essay, that every single sentence and paragraph is directed to, and useful for, providing this particular answer.

**b.** One of the most common criticisms which essays elicit is ‘asserts rather than argues its points.’ It is one thing to say ‘X’; it is quite another to provide a *justification* for X. In an academic essay, you are asked to do the latter. And to do that, you must provide evidence – empirical evidence if your essay tackles an empirical question (e.g.: ‘What were France’s main reasons for denying EU membership to the UK in the 1960s?’), or philosophical evidence if your essay is in philosophy.

As this course is a philosophical course, let me elaborate a little, by way of an example. Suppose that you are asked to write an essay on the following question: ‘The affluent in the West are not under a moral duty to help the starving in Third World countries.’ A standard justification for this claim is ‘we have special bonds to our compatriots, through a common culture, common language, etc., and no such bond towards distant strangers.’ That justification is not enough, on its own, to make the case. One must in turn provide *reasons* for denying the existence of such a bond with distant strangers. Moreover, that justification assumes that the existence of such a bond is a necessary condition for generating a duty to help. But it must *show* that this is the case.

Absent such arguments, the justification is not, in fact, a justification: it is just an assertion which remains unsubstantiated.

**c. Writing clearly and lucidly.**

If your essay is well structured, then you will find it easier to make your points clearly. Do bear in mind, though, that your reader might not be as familiar as you are with the readings you are using. And in fact, even your teachers might not be able to discern what you have in mind just because you are using materials covered in the course. So always take care to set out in some detail the position you are looking at. For example, if you decide to examine Mill's conception of justice, explain what his conception is by precise reference to his works, and then proceed to discuss it.

**d. Tips and techniques**

*Always* write up an essay plan *before* you start writing the essay itself. Make the plan as detailed as possible, and highlight the connections and links between the different parts of the essay.

*Always* take time to re-read your essay. Finish your first draft a day before the deadline, set the essay aside for half a day, and get back to it with a fresher eye. You will notice problems which you would not have spotted otherwise.

I would also strongly suggest that you read your essay to yourself *aloud*, as if you were delivering it to an audience (even better if you can find an audience). Again, you will notice overlong sentences, awkward phrasing, obscure passages, which at normal reading would have escaped your notice.

*Always* reference your essay properly. See the separate guidance note on referencing.

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